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STATE OF MICHIGAN
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
LANSING



THOMAS D. WATKINS, JR.
SUPERINTENDENT OF
PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

June 28, 2004

MEMORANDUM

TO: State Board of Education

FROM: Eileen F. Hamilton, State Board Executive

SUBJECT: Presentation on Mentoring Program in Pontiac

Attached is an article from the *Detroit Free Press* regarding a middle school mentoring program in Pontiac.

The following individuals have been invited to the July 7, 2004, State Board meeting to present information on the program:

- The Honorable Fred M. Mester, Circuit Judge, Oakland County
- Mr. Derek A. Wynns, Executive Co-Director, Positive Male Role Models (PMR), Pontiac Central High School
- Mr. Jarvis Pitts, Student

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ROCHELLE RILEY: Pontiac pulls together for its children

BY ROCHELLE RILEY

FREE PRESS COLUMNIST

June 25, 2004

Thanks to the persistent work of a compassionate judge and a dedicated group of Pontiac schools alumni, *every* middle school student in the struggling 11,000-student school district will soon get *two* mentors, a fellow student and an adult from the Pontiac community.

Now that's the way to truly help students.

Oakland County Circuit Court Judge Fred Mester and the Pontiac Alumni Foundation have been trying for years to find ways to help students in the Pontiac system, where the children of working-class commuters and longtime residents toil alongside the children of poor parents and of autoworkers. Two-thirds of its students are economically disadvantaged and 16 percent are classified as needing special education.

Residents have watched their schools, like those in other urban centers, decline and have seen many students either drop out or finish with low test scores and low self-esteem. And Mester and other judges kept seeing too many students in their courtrooms. So they decided enough was enough.

"We want to demonstrate that clearly you can stop the erosion of children in the inner city," Mester said. "I have had enough of one generation after the other of Pontiac's youth coming through our court system instead of the education system. That's the way our whole foundation feels."

So they formed the foundation three years ago to help students. It has a 40-member board and, according to the judge, "everyone who has an interest in the children of Pontiac is a member."

Someone to look up to

Students with few victories and fewer expectations need more than a new book or an occasional field trip. They need a steady diet of patience and care -- and role models to show them not only how it can be done, but *that* it can be done.

The alumni foundation's unique mentoring program will eventually assign a mentor to each of the 920 students in Pontiac's four middle schools.

But you must take a step before you walk -- so the first mentors will be assigned to the 202 eighth-graders at Washington Middle School.

That's 202 people Pontiac is recruiting to change the city. Program officials are recruiting everywhere, even at a gala reception Wednesday night where DaimlerChrysler officials announced their contribution of \$100,000 toward the program.

Mentor training begins in July, after which each adult mentor will get a handbook of approved activities, field trips and ideas. Students will meet with their peer mentors, senior high school students also trained as mentors, twice a week during sixth hour. They will meet with their adult mentors, officials hope, once a week for two hours. Additionally, the program will set up e-mail communication between students and their adult mentors.

Each adult mentor must commit to serve for one year.

Sandra Butler, a special education teacher at Pontiac Central, is the chairman of the committee overseeing the project. She said she plans to accomplish several goals.

"We hope first that this will help build relationships, not only peer-to-peer, but adult-to-adult. We want to improve student attendance, improve academic achievement, create employability skills, improve our MEAP scores and improve the students' awareness of their community."

The program also will offer tutoring from engineers and mathematicians who have already signed up to help students. More than anything, she is calling on potential mentors to be "nurturers, social workers, counselors."

Besides helping students, the foundation plans to get more parents involved through receptions and incentives, Mester said.

A group effort

So how do you create a system of big brothers and big sisters for 920 children? With money. And how did alumni board members get the money?

They begged.

And automaker DaimlerChrysler stepped up, promising Mester money only if the foundation could raise some on its own.

"Frank Fountain said you show us \$160,000 and we'll give you \$100,000," Mester said. "We got it because of secretaries, clerks, homemakers, firemen, policemen, emergency individuals, payroll deductions, contributing to the fund. It's been a community effort not only within Pontiac, but outside in the seven cities also served by the Pontiac schools."

Fountain, DaimlerChrysler's senior vice president of external affairs and public policy, said, indeed, that he was moved by the way the funds were raised.

The judge succeeded "by recruiting the alumni of the Pontiac school system and getting them engaged," Fountain said.

Excited Pontiac school officials said this new program is only the beginning.

"This is a part of the vision that we have for finding a mentor for every child in our district," said Dr. Mildred Mason, who just completed her first year as superintendent. "The Pontiac Alumni Foundation stepped up to the plate and brought with them a local partner. . . . But coming off this, we're going to work on doing the same thing for the high school students and elementary school students up to and including the early childhood students."

The alumni mentoring program hired two alumni -- Ransom Seay and Derrick Wynn -- to run the new project. The pair had already had some success with their own mentoring program for young black boys, arguably the segment of the school population that most needs mentors.

They are recruiting mentors from senior classes at Pontiac Central and Pontiac Northern high schools and are asking potential adult mentors to contact the Pontiac Alumni Foundation at 248-451-6879 for applications.

A judge with a vision

If Judge Mester's name sounds familiar, and it should. He's the practical judge who sometimes uses sentencing to make a difference. He was the one who sentenced a high school football player convicted of sexual assault to visit Oakland County high schools last year to discuss consequences of poor actions.

And he's the judge who, nearly 16 years ago, began requiring people he sentenced to have a high school diploma to get probation.

With the new mentoring program, Mester and a host of Pontiac residents will help students just at the point where they're starting to fail, at just the right moment to change their lives.

The mentors and community, he said, are "all looking forward, no one looking back, no one pointing fingers, everyone working together."

That sounds like a blueprint that should be shared, no, copied, across the state

Catch Rochelle on her show "Am I Right?" on WTVS TV 56 at 5:30 p.m. Fridays and 2 p.m. Sundays. You can order her new book 'Life Lessons' (Detroit Free Press, \$14.95) at 800-245-5082 or www.freep.com/bookstore. To read her recent columns, visit www.freep.com/index/rochelleriley.htm.

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